

## **AFTER NAIROBI, A NEW ROUND OF WORLD SOCIAL FORUMS**

Gustave Massiah  
CRID President  
April 2007

### **NAIROBI 2007, AN EXCELLENT WORLD SOCIAL FORUM**

The Nairobi World Social Forum was, in my opinion, an excellent forum. One of the most interesting, because one of the most contradictory. The Nairobi Forum demonstrated the strength and vigour of the world social forums and alter-globalization movement. The alter-globalization movement is not limited to the social forums, but the forum process does occupy a special place within the movement. The Nairobi WSF brought to light various questions regarding this process. At first, problems, difficulties and very strong contradictions related to the process piled up. However, after two days, the forum process finally overrode these initial questionings.

**The world-wide dimension of the World Social Forum** was good. There were strong delegations from every continent (from India, Pakistan, Brazil, Italy, France, etc.). Much progress was made with regard to a deepening of the various debates, as well as an elaboration and creation of world-wide networks. This progress was apparent vis-à-vis a series of issues; for example, those of water, debt, food sovereignty, and European-African relations (in particular, between France and Africa). There was a broadening of the networks present and really involved in the forum process. To give just one example, the human rights caucus; the 500-person tent was continually full and almost 80 networks were involved in its preparation. The same was true for the debt issue, with networks as varied as Eurodad, CADTM and Jubilee South cooperating to build these spaces. With regard to migration, there was a real debate, picking up where the Bamako and Athens Forums had left off. The construction of a veritable world-wide network was begun, starting with migrant associations in Europe and the Migreurop network, as well as associations from Africa, the United States, Mexico, the Philippines, Indonesia, etc.

**The World Social Forum's African dimension** was excellent. Firstly, with regard to participation: 1,300 Tanzanians, 1,000 Ugandans, 800 South Africans, 700 Ethiopians, 300 Senegalese, 150 Congolese, etc. Several of the larger African delegations were particularly non-elitist in composition; they mobilized popular movements and had been prepared by national social forums. Africa was the continent that organized the greatest number of national social forums (more than ten in 2006). One of the Forum's successes was the strong trade-union presence. Nearly fifty African trade unions actively participated in the Forum. There was even a delegation of 115 union activists from Sudan. The Nairobi Forum saw the very first public appearance at the continental level for the African trade-union movement.

We were afraid that the WSF might not go further than the polycentric Bamako Forum. As it turned out, our fears were unwarranted. The Forums (continental, national and local) strengthen one another and strengthen civil societies. At the Bamako Forum, we

witnessed the recognition and visibility of a structured, African civil society: farmers' organizations, grassroots trade unions (mine workers, etc.), committees for debt cancellation, associations for women, for neighbourhoods, for peace, for migrants, a nascent ecological movement, etc. At the Nairobi Forum, the African dimension was the most noticeable aspect, a meeting between the different Africas, with the will and difficulty of overcoming the colonial language-based borders. Swahili, a great regional language, was especially present. Despite its diversity and contradictions, one can now talk of an emerging social, citizen-based African movement at the continental level.

**The Kenyan dimension of the World Social Forum** was much less convincing. In addition to organizational problems, confrontations within the Kenyan social movement were especially severe. As for attendance, the most conservative estimate was 30,000 persons, while the highest estimate gave 60,000 participants. For a country the size of Kenya, that is quite impressive. It's still a bit early to consider the Forum's local impact; the Forum will serve as a trigger and educator, and can result in real progress being made.

**The process raised numerous questions.** Legitimate criticisms were made during the organization of the WSF, regarding the implementation choices and procedures. They must not mask issues raised by the process that were, in one form or another, also present at the preceding forums.

Progress was made regarding the Forum's **geographic enlargement**. We knew that a forum in Africa wouldn't be easy, especially as South Africa didn't present itself as a candidate. However, not many African countries are capable of hosting a WSF, because of their size and the weakness of their social movement. The Forum is difficult to organize in many cities due to its current format.

**Measuring the impact of a WSF** is also difficult, especially considering the difference between a particular forum's impact and the impact of the forum process. The question of the number of participants should be considered in context. But media exposure gives great weight to this question and favours an event of considerable size. Media exposure is itself to be considered in context: are we interested in attracting extensive exposure or winning the media's "sympathy"? Our desired impact is first and foremost qualitative; it's more a matter of diversity and convergence than of standardization. From this point of view, real progress has been made; for example, the issues are now dealt with much more thoroughly than at the beginning of the World Social Forums.

While **the enlargement of the social bases** is certainly insufficient, it is real. The trade unions, farmers' organizations and resident associations have been present from the beginning; for example, the CUT, MST and MNLN in Brazil and the African trade unions in Nairobi. However, ensuring the presence of the most poor and the underprivileged is more difficult. The participation of the No-Vox constituted a new phase which has since been consolidated, in particular with the migrants in Bamako; in Mumbai, it was the Dalits who ensured a qualitative change of direction.

**Ensuring the participation of the poor and underprivileged** necessitates a continued (and difficult) voluntary effort; in particular, to ensure the participation of associations representing these underclasses at the Forum. The No-Vox, the Dalits in Mumbai and the fishermen in Karachi gained access to the Forum through their associations – they were either organized, or they managed to organize themselves. It is much more difficult to

participate in the Forum on a purely individual level. The organizers of the Nairobi Forum made certain especially regrettable choices: a distant location without free shuttle service, a very high admission price for the poor, insufficient perequation, and insufficient accessibility to a section of the shantytown associations.

**The ethical requirements** in the management of the WSFs are an essential issue. The issue of access to the poor showed a great increase in the ethical demands of the alter-globalization movement. While claiming that another world is possible, can we continue the very same domineering behaviour that is being rejected? The Forums must also be the window to another possible world. Three important questions were raised regarding the acceptable compromises: how to ensure the organization and security of an event such as the Forum? What type of consumption should be accepted at the Forums? How are the Forums to be funded?

**The political enlargement** of the forum process is a recurring issue. It is to be expected that certain contradictions, even confrontations, arise and place in opposition the various social movement and citizen-based actors of a country or region. Several counter-forums have already been organized, such as those of London and Mumbai. At the Nairobi Forum, the People's Parliament, which played a decisive role in the creation of the WSF, organized a separate forum. In her post-forum report, Wangui of the People's Parliament explains that this forum was not organized in opposition to the World Social Forum, but rather because they had not been able to participate in it. She also declares her support for social forums.

The issue of political enlargement also calls into question the ever greater presence of certain movements, such as the very large NGOs, which defend more moderate positions. It is not enough to propose reestablishing an equilibrium by encouraging greater participation on the part of the other movements: the greater resources of the large associations must not allow them to influence or control the forums' evolution.

**The connection between enlargement and radicalization** is currently the most important issue facing the social forum process. The alter-globalization movement is based upon a refusal of neo-liberal globalization and the conviction that another world is possible, one which necessitates breaking away from the dominant mindset and neo-liberal politics. While enlargement is a measure of success for the process, it must not entail a watering-down of the movement. It is necessary to strengthen the movement's commitments, as long as this does not lead to exclusion and sectarianism. In the language of the forum, one talks of the link between convergence and juxtaposition, between "horizontality" and the definition of priorities and mobilization areas, between scheduling and agglutination (or "Brazilianism": the call to gather around a self-managed base).

**An experiment at convergence** was attempted on the fourth day of the WSF: the proposal to gather together - without abandoning the self-managed activities - in the morning according to networks or campaigns and in the afternoon according to specific themes (21 themes from a total of 1,100 registered activities), so as to define proposals and mobilizations. While the procedure was considered interesting, the results were inconclusive due to insufficient preparation before the forum and organizational difficulties with regard to rescheduling.

**The strategic debate** on enlargement and radicalization, on the Forum's structure and the process's evolution leads us to a more fundamental debate concerning the social transformation's future prospects. According to whether we are more affected by the urgency of the situation and the need to define medium-term objectives, or we choose to emphasize the historic character of the alter-globalization movement and pursue more long-term goals. The direction taken will determine the discussions on the movement's loss of impetus or on its permanency. That is why the movement's fundamental debate is the strategic debate, a strategic consideration allowing us to link our short-term actions with our long-term goals, the urgent need to find an answer to unacceptable situations, and the profound transformation of societies and of the world.

## **A NEW ROUND OF WORLD SOCIAL FORUMS**

Below, I return to the speech I gave at the International Council in Parma, in October 2006. It seems to me that the Nairobi WSF has confirmed my hypotheses.

**The alter-globalization movement has not broken down.** It is only proper to point out its loss of impetus, and yet it never ceases to expand and deepen. Firstly, a geographic enlargement, as demonstrated by the World Social Forums of Porto Alegre, Mumbai and Nairobi; the polycentric forum of Bamako, Caracas and Karachi; the continental forums and the national forums, including that of the United States in Atlanta in June 2006; and the never-ending stream of local forums. A social enlargement, with the farmers' movements, including the landless movements, the industrial trade unions, the No-Vox, including the Dalits, the committees of deteriorated neighbourhoods and shantytowns, the migrant forums, the world women's march, and the youth camps. A thematic enlargement, with the thematic forums such as those of education and water, and the associated forums for local officials, members of parliament, judges, etc.

The alter-globalization movement has grown considerably in strength in very little time, in less than ten years. Yet, it has not won. It would have been surprising to have won so soon, especially as it is not such a simple thing to define what would be meant by "winning". The alter-globalization movement is a long-term movement with long-term goals. It is a movement that evolves according to the changing situations. Let us consider a few hypotheses.

**First hypothesis: the alter-globalization movement is entering a new phase.** We are wrapping up a round of world social forums which first began after Seattle. It's a question of defining those elements of the project that best correspond to this new period. Important political changes are being prepared. Especially as neo-liberalism is undergoing a crisis and globalization's neo-liberal phase is probably coming to an end. We are arriving at the limits of finance capital's hegemony and its "short-term" mindset. The economic hegemony of the United States has been exhausted. A new world order is emerging with the growing economic strength of China, India and also Brazil. The never-ending war raises new contradictions and the American elections introduce uncertainties regarding the conducting of wars. The situation in France will change during the elections and the period of political-reconstruction. The Latin American political movement is redefining, vis-à-vis diverse situations, new relations between the movements and governments.

**Second hypothesis: the alter-globalization movement has developed a concrete alternative.** On the basis of its challenge to neo-liberalism, the movement has confirmed its determination and has gone from resistance to a counter-offensive and the putting forward of alternatives. The strategic orientation that has emerged from the Forums is the following: in opposition to the organization of societies and of the world through global-market adjustments and the supremacy of the global capital market, we propose organizing societies and the world according to the principle of universal access to human rights. This principle has already altered the nature of the movements, whose convergence is alter-globalization's principal characteristic; each of these movements has evolved by incorporating the priority given to universal access to human rights.

**Third hypothesis: the alter-globalization movement must oppose the new ideological offensive.** Neo-conservatism, which gives priority to the military and the concept of a perpetual, preventive war. Organizing the economy according to discrimination and racism. The rise of a security-based ideology, the return of identity politics, fundamentalism, zero tolerance, and the criminalization of movements.

**Fourth hypothesis: the alter-globalization movement's procedures have been improved.** They combine struggles and resistance movements, campaigns and mobilizations, innovative social practices, elaboration, alternatives, and negotiation proposals. They put forward the construction of a new political culture which is being developed within the Forums. Citizen-based assessments are challenging the monopoly of a "dominant expertise" and of a single way of thinking; it is making permanent the transition from a "TINA" (There Is No Alternative) mindset dear to Mrs. Thatcher to the ability to imagine another possible world.

**Fifth hypothesis: the alter-globalization movement is a historic movement with long-term goals.** It prolongs and renews the three preceding historic movements. The historic decolonization movement; from this perspective, alter-globalization has greatly modified the North-South representations to the benefit of a common project. The historic movement encompassing the working-class struggles; from this perspective, the evolution towards a global, social and citizen-based movement. The movement encompassing the struggles for democracy, beginning in the 1960s and '70s; from this perspective, the renewal of the democratic imperative following the implosion of the Soviet Union in 1989 and the regressions engendered by security-based ideologies.